

# **Third Wave CyberUnions - or No Unions.**

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In his 1995 book, *Navigating in Cyberspace*, Frank Ogden, a leading Canadian futurist, warns, "the next decade will make the past look tame.

... within 10 years, the technology that is hardly out of the starting gate will change 90 percent of our culture and society ." (Ogden; 12, 3,6) We live in a New Economy - one "all about ... the ability to transform [organizations] into new entities that yesterday couldn't be imagined and that the day after tomorrow may be obsolete." (Tapscott; 43)

What a remarkable New World in which Organized Labor must find its way! Imagine how farther along all this may be just a few years from now. By 2005 or so our insatiable appetite for information may have us -

- wear a compact picture-phone and computer on our wrist and dictate to it by voice, even as we enjoy listening to its "voice" in turn;
- use it to access any type of information, anywhere, at anytime;
- use it to stay "in the loop" and stay in touch with significant others all the time;
- use it to send and receive messages in all languages, as if our own;
- use it to surf the Internet and Web with the stressless help of "smart" software that provides useful information even before we ask for it;
- and, feel empowered by these information aids as never before!

Even if only half of this is realized in the next few years, the rest is likely to be close behind, and the impact is likely to prove mind-boggling.

A remarkable information future beckons ... though some will make far more of it than others. Labor can turn it to advantage, both for itself as a social movement and for its individual members, but the doing will not come easy, and the hour grows late.

## **Labor at Bat.**

Labor is challenged to renew itself once again, as not since the 1930s, when it had to "invent" large-scale industrial unionism, and the mid-1990s, when it opted for the invigorating "New Voice" vision of the Sweeney team. The head of that team, after taking "the hitherto taboo step of saying that labor is in danger of becoming 'irrelevant,'" authorized an immediate step-up in the use of informatics.

(Heckscher; xv) Accordingly, in 1996, the AFL-CIO held its first major meeting to discuss Labor and the Internet. In 1998, an ad hoc committee of 12 Information Technology officers of the most progressive unions published a White Paper on making the most of computer uses. Similarly, a group of specialists inside the AFL-CIO were busy that year studying how to offer an "Intelligent Agent" to unionists.

Many American unionists, perhaps as many as 4-million, are on-line. At the same time, however, of the 74 international unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO, as late as the Fall of 1998 only 44 of the largest and most progressive variety had Web sites. Nearly half (30) were not yet participating in the biggest change in communications in modern times.

Accordingly, by about 2003 or earlier the matter should be clear: The American labor movement will either be employing computers with enviable finesse, or it will have become an inconsequential has-been, the organizational equivalent of "road kill on the Information Superhighway."

### **Gains To Date**

Many gains have already been won, gains of which Organized labor has much reason to be proud: Consider this account from a very computer-savvy Research Director of a major international union: "I've saved thousands of jobs, thousands! We come into bargaining knowing more about the company than they do, by far. We've researched everything, I mean everything - their return on investment, their philanthropy profile, their executive profit-sharing payout ... like, I mean, everything!

"When they say they can't afford this or that, we come right back and show them how they can - and we show them what they will gain if they do. We give them a better analysis of their ability to pay than they ever thought possible. And when we've got the contract we were after, we sell it to our members, and begin to prove to the company they were right all along to go along."

Similarly, an activist with whom I talked after I gave a workshop on union and computer possibilities proudly explained his own situation:

"Does it help? You bet it does! I've got my entire office in this little machine, all of my data decks. I can help a member right on the spot, no waiting, no fuss. They really are impressed, and I feel good about it. Heck, I've been a computer nerd since the 1970s, and I keep upgrading my stuff, so it's easy for me now. I can't remember how it was before I took this way, but it couldn't have been good enough."

Accordingly, Labor's record to date, put as a bumper sticker, might read - "Extraordinary possibilities under development." Problems persist, of course, what with only 25% of unionists on-line, and even fewer clicking on Web sites other than that of their local or union. As well, all too many such Web sites are dull, static, top-down billboards, and far too many leaders (and large numbers of members) are comfortable with that. Deep-reaching questions abound, as in this thought from the sage head of a very impressive computer-using local:

"Part of what's happened is that the Labor Movement hasn't really decided how it wants to be, or what it want to look like. And so, it has a hard time setting up computer support systems. Because it is not sure what it wants to be."

Far more, in short, is required if Organized Labor is to soon maximize the potential of computer use, an adoption on which its survival may largely hinge.

### **A Division of the House**

Three types of unions are evident today vis-a-vis uses made of computers. The first, which I call CyberNaught unionism, involves a bare minimum employ of computer potentialities. It is generally restricted to staid reliance on a mainframe for bookkeeping of dues and benefits data. The second, CyberDrift unionism, moves spastically first in this direction, and then that one, lacking any rhyme or reason in its rudderless efforts. It stands out in its combination of aimlessness with thoughtlessness. The third, CyberGain unionism, is a proud model to aspire to, and one which sets the stage for the emergence soon of its 21st century successor, CyberUnionism.

CyberNaught unions and locals seek to preserve and persist, rather than update or innovate. Where computers are concerned, they employ them only or primarily to satisfy traditional business needs, as in accounting and bookkeeping (dues and benefit records; payroll data; etc.). They are content to use data processing systems to keep track of things and to codify standard business practices. Most are indifferent (the others, hostile) to what upgrades here might otherwise do to support people, plans, and progress.

The issue, then, is not as simple as whether or not a union or local uses computers: Rather, the issue is why and how. Put starkly, CyberNaught unions and locals use computers to get through the day, and do so in as flat and uninspired a way as is possible. Officials settle for inertia and quietism. Much of the problem is rooted in conceptual inertia: Out-dated habits of mind have far too many of these labor leaders preferring form to function, protocol to results, and rhetoric to risk-taking. This is not only about failings of intellect; it is also about failings of the spirit. For if, as Orwell warned, poverty annihilates the future, so also in its own way does poverty of vision. CyberNaught power-holders want the future to be like the past, only more so. They treat unionism as if it can only be a passive institution, and they act as a deadening hand on change. In consequence, their unions and locals sleep-walk when they might stride, and they remain vulnerable in ways they hardly realize.

### **Galloping off in All Directions.**

CyberDrift unions or locals move aimlessly, like a cork bobbing on a turbulent sea, though with far less likelihood than a cork of staying afloat. Bewildered leaders look on as if in a daze, union officers to whom things happen rather than people who make new beginnings. Caught in this hapless course, Labor's effort to use computers falls far short of its potential.

Computerization is persistently prolific, as it moves from stand-alone PCs to networks, and from computer-oriented humans to human-oriented computing. Its record affirms we are in the midst of a revolution, not an evolution. But you would never know this from the inchoate and directionless plight of a CyberDrift union. These unions and their locals are seldom the adequate and inspiring organizations they want to be thought of, much to the rue of all who really know them and understand how much more is possible.

### **Labor's Best Hope - for the Moment.**

In contrast with CyberNaught types, CyberGain unions and locals make much of computer possibilities. The good news is their number appears larger with every passing year; the bad news is their ranks remain far too small for Labor's good. Worse yet, they are often thought the end-all, when

in fact - for labor's sake - they must prove way stations on the way to becoming CyberUnions. CyberGain unions and locals employ computers to support people, plans, and progress, as well as to keep track of things (traditional business operations). They pour new wine into new bottles. Their use of computers can be creative (though as I shall argue later, it still does not go far enough). Officers, staffers, and activists alike appreciate how much can be done, and they enjoy adapting gains made elsewhere in and outside of Labor. Much success here can be traced to conceptual advances. Progressive habits of mind have CyberGain labor leaders, staffers, and rank-and-file activists preferring function to form, results to protocol, and risk-taking to rhetoric. In consequence, their unions and locals are dynamic operations, supple and original in ways in which they take justifiable pride.

### **Reality Check.**

Before too glowing an impression is given, it should be noted that CyberGain unions and locals have many telling weaknesses. To begin with, most have little or no knowledge of the existence of one another. In keeping with the costly isolation of unions from other unions, they are busy re-inventing the wheel instead of trading good ideas back and forth. Despite conferences the AFL-CIO has run to encourage cross-fertilization, workshops held regularly at the George Meany Center, and the efforts computers specialists of 12 or so major unions are making to stay in touch, it is as if the organizations were ships passing at night. Second, CyberGain unions and locals often try to do it on the cheap. Many are reluctant to pay the annual maintenance costs required to keep a complex, multi-machine system up and going, better yet constantly upgrade it. In consequence, they often flounder trying to best computer problems they should not have had in the first place.

Finally, and most telling of all, the CyberGain unions I studied had too little in the way of an overarching vision. Many seemed to have lost sight of why they had started using computers to begin with. That is, they were not asking good questions about the desirability of this or that use with reference to the organization's well-being, with reference to what the rank--and--file might get from it (or lose to it). Instead, they were weighing computer uses in small--minded, rather than in grand ways, and they were missing transformational opportunities. More specifically, where computer applications are concerned, CyberGain unions and locals often remain frozen in the first generation of Internet use. They are preoccupied with meeting straight-forward informational needs. Their Web site typically offers their logo and basic facts, a static display critics dismiss as "brochure ware" or "billboards." They fail to understand, or decline to value the fact that second generation applications are quite different: Known as transactional, they emphasize the dynamic participation of the parties, rather than accept passivity, as at present in far too many CyberGain organizations. While the CyberGain model is clearly superior to the CyberNaught and CyberDrift options, it will not suffice. It rebuilds, but it does not adequately renew. By failing to take the full potential of computerization boldly into account, CyberGain organizations do not so much deal with the future as they streamline the past. Only a far more ambitious use of informatics in general, and computers in particular, will do the job. I think it will be adequate for only a few more years. The early 21st century requires far more.

### **Getting to a Third Wave CyberUnion F-I-S-T Model**

I am persuaded Labor's overdue use of computers, while necessary, is insufficient. If Labor is to reinvent itself as rapidly, as thoroughly, and as meaningfully as appears necessary, far more than CyberGain unionism seems required. Specifically, early 21st century unions must experiment with an ambitious and creative alternative to the Labor status quo, one that dares to incorporate futuristics, innovations, services, and labor traditions(F-I-S-T) - all of which go better when they build on creative computerization. The first such aid, futuristics, empowers as only foreknowledge can. The

second, innovations, energizes as only creativity can. The third, services, engages as only rewards can. And the fourth, traditions, bonds as only emotional ties can.

Labor urgently needs the rewards possible from reliable forecasting. And the rewards that innovations, such as computer data-mining, uniquely offer. And the rewards that computer-based services, such as volume discounts on PCs, can provide. And the rewards possible from the computer-aided modernization of traditions (as in the production of inter-active software rich with labor history material). Why this unusual F-I-S-T set? Because as a futurist, a professional forecaster, I think Labor must take advantage of this ancient, and yet also avant garde art form. Similarly, as a labor educator, I believe innovation a resource labor urgently needs to make more of. And like most labor educators, I champion both the extension of union-offered services and the celebration of Labor traditions, for goods and lore can make a powerful combination - especially if facilitated by new-finagled computerization aids. Together, then, these four additional items (F-I-S-T) should provide Organized Labor with the foresight, the dynamism, the appeal, and the heart necessary to build on its CyberGain strengths and reverse its long-term decline.

<b>Table 1</b>	<b>CyberUnion - Labor's Best (Only?) Third Wave Hope</b>
Definition:	A union or local that uses its CyberGain status to pursue much more development.
Attributes:	Led by technophile visionaries AND pragmatic power-holders (not always the same people). Always searching for informatics, innovations that might make a difference. No hesitation to try experiments. Employs a "Learning Culture." Has a participatory bias; pro-democratic ethos. Draws on Futuristics, Innovations, Services, and Traditions (F-I-S-T) - via informatics.
Gains:	Far more efficient and effective. Inspires members and prospective members.
Losses:	Requires dedication of time and energy. Cannot expect to succeed with every experiment; must have comeback capacity.

### **The Labor Digerati to the Rescue!**

Fortunately, a new generation of Web-faring union activists are eager to get on with it. Labor's "digerati" types have lives steeped in Information Age technologies, and are living ever more effectively in a networked world of union boosters. Forward-thinking and visionary, these techno-savvy men and women have a hefty dose of indefatigable optimism. Unlike many of their peers, their expectations concerning the renewing of Organized Labor are almost without limits. When such activists envision the years ahead, they expect computers to soon secure unprecedented access of everyone in Labor to everyone else... officers to members, members to officers. unionists to non-unionists, and vice versa. Rapid polling of the membership. Galvanizing of rallies ore-mail protests.

Spotlighting of models worth emulating, and wrongs for the righting. Libraries put at a unionist's beck and call, along with valuable arbitration, grievance, and mediation material. Open chatrooms and bulletin boards for unfettered telling and listening, for the creation of a High Tech electronic (virtual) "community" to bolster High Touch solidarity among real folk. As if this was not enough, the vision of Labor's digerati includes a quantum increase soon in the collective intelligence and consciousness of "global village" unionists in a global International. Unprecedented cooperation across national borders. The first effective counter to transnational corporate behemoths. And, going out a year or two further, possibly even Intelligent Agent software housed in computer "wearables,"empowering unionists as never before. Guided by this growing cadre, Labor can soon move more unions and locals into computer use status. And thereby invigorate the membership. Draw in new members. Intimidate opponents. Intrigue vote-seekers. Meet the aspirations that union "netizens" have for the Labor Movement. And in other valuable ways, significantly bolster Labor's chances of moving especially advanced unions and locals up to CyberUnion status early in the 21stcentury.

<b>Table 2</b>	<b>Comparison of Types of Modern Unions and Locals</b>
Cyber Naught Union/Local	If you don't get with it, you won't matter ("If you're out for lunch, you are lunch!"). Ignorance here is not bliss; it is fatal.
Cyber Drift Union/Local	If you don't have a clear sense of where you want your union/local to go, you won't get there ...or any other place really worth reaching.
Cyber Gain Union/Local	If you believe your union/local has it made, and need not go very far from the present, you are sealing a disappointing fate. Your reach must always exceed your grasp. Informatics means there is no status quo anymore - only ceaseless innovation or decline.
CyberUnion	If you dream a bolder dream, dare brighter moves, and take to heart the finest values of the global labor movement, you just might do us all honor.

### **Reality Check.**

Labor's sharp-edged possibility - either informatics mastery or fadeout - is not the same thing as saying computerization can or will save Labor. As one of the most extensive pioneering users of computers, a federation of 403 unions in 113 countries, maintains - "The computers are one possible medium, not the message." (ICEM; 56) Computerization is no "silver bullet." It is a complex, demanding, and often exasperating tool, only as reliable and effective as the humans in charge. As well, it is no solo star. It works best when part of a mix that includes militancy, labor law reform, political action, and so on. It works best when aiding such "high touch" efforts as "one-on-one" organizing,"shoe leather" vote-getting, "button hole" lobbying for labor law reform, and so on. It works best when kept as an accessory and an aid, rather than allowed to become a confining and superordinating system.

It would be a costly mistake of unionists to confuse computerization with a magic remedy, almost as costly as present-day under-utilization by Labor of its remarkable potential. Which is to say, that while it cannot"rescue" Labor, unless Organized labor soon makes the most creative possible use of it, as with the F-I-S-T model, Labor probably cannot be rescued.

## Summary: Labor Union Prospects?

Unions five years from now are likely to be very different from the present: Either their hallmark will be their irrelevance, or they will draw handsomely on what I call CyberUnion attributes (F-I-S-T). Either they may be ossified relics, or they will command respect as mature information-intensive power houses, fully the equal (and possibly the better!) of anything the business world boasts. Unless and until Labor makes more creative use of computer and cyberspace possibilities, its long slide into irrelevance may be slowed, but it will not be reversed. Murray Kempton, one of the most insightful of recent writers about unionism, wistfully notes of seemingly appealing reforms -- "One sees at once that here is the way to get at the thing, and wonders why, with the sign painted this plain, the road has been so seldom followed." (Kazin) It is time to heed signs pointing toward the CyberUnion, and move to give this Information Age labor organization a 21st century trial.

## Recommended Resources:

- Boyett, Joseph and Jimmie. *The Guru Guide: The Best Ideas of the Top Management Thinkers*. New York: Wiley, 1998. \$25.  
A far-ranging synthesis of current workplace changes, as explored by 79 top-flight consultants. Especially valuable are essays offering 33 reasons for resistance to change, 33 reasons for creating a learning organization; comparisons of traditional versus high-performance organizations, and the attributes of laudable leadership (continual learning, courage, curiosity, daring, discernment, farsightedness, humor, integrity, synergizing, and thinking win-win).
- Cohen-Rosenthal, Edward, ed. *Unions, Management, and Quality: Opportunities for Innovation and Excellence*. Chicago, IL: Irwin, 1995.  
Thirteen original essays, jointly authored by union and management "partners" in achieving outstanding workplace cooperation. Illustrates how a labor organization can break from old ways and construct a new and better reality.
- Rawlins, Gregory J. E. *Slaves of the Machine: The Quickening of Computer Technology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997.  
Easily one of the most engaging, informative, and provocative explorations available of computers, artificial life, and CyberAge possibilities. Dares to explore the possibility that the computer is not a "toaster," but a "kitten" -- and all the awesome implications thereof.
- Shostak, Arthur B. *Robust Unionism: Innovations in the Labor Movement*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1991.  
An exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of over 200 major ongoing reforms, paying special attention to their transferability. Features close-ups of remarkable change-agents and very varied projects. Many of the unions and locals cited warrant the honorific label - CyberGain operation.
- Zohar, Danah. *Reviving the Corporate Brain*. San Francisco, CA.:Berrett-Koehler, 1997. Makes a good case for transforming organizations to thrive on uncertainty, deal creatively with rapid change, release the full potential of leaders and members alike.

- The Communications Workers of America Web site is located at <http://www.cwa-union.org>. It contains a section on Union Labor and Information with links to the following: CWA Locals & Affiliates; Unions on the Web (North America); Unions on the Web (International); Other Labor-Related Sites; Labor & Industrial Relations E-mail Discussion Lists; and Related Areas on CWA's Web Site

In addition, the CWA site has on-line publications from the CWA Research department, sites to the CWA legislative and political Web site, links for members and the general public to participate in on-line activism, and a large section on industry information which includes Communications & Media Industry: Telephone, Cable TV, Broadcast Media, Newspaper Printing and Publishing, Public & Health Care Workers, Higher Education, Airline Passenger Service, and Internet Job Banks.

- For a fine example of a site maintained by an enthusiast, see IBEW member James Border's Web site in Nashville, Tennessee ([www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Sands/1173/ibew.html](http://www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Sands/1173/ibew.html)). James, a member of IBEW Local Union 429, has developed his own unofficial IBEW Web site where he displays some labor links and basic information about the IBEW.
- Special attention should be paid to the AFL-CIO Web site, available at [www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org), and called Today's Unions. It offers an "Executive Pay Watch" service that keeps tabs on exorbitant CEO salaries. It also has a "Congressional Page" with e-mail addresses and voting records of all the members of Congress.
- Michael Moore, filmmaker and author, offers no-holds-barred commentaries on Labor and almost everything else. Accessible at [www.dogeatdogfilms.com/](http://www.dogeatdogfilms.com/)

### Footnotes:

Heckscher, Charles C. *The New Unionism: Employee Involvement in the Changing Corporation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.

ICEM (International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions). *Power and Counterpoint: The Union Response to Global Capital*. Chicago, Ill.: Pluto Press, 1996

Kazin, Alfred. "'Missing Murray Kempton.'" *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 30, 1997. p. 35.  
Ogden, Frank. *Navigating in Cyberspace: A Guide to the Next Millennium*. Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1995.

Tapscott, Don. *The Digital Economy: Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996.

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*"This time, like all times, is a very good one if we but know what to do with it." Ralph Waldo Emerson*